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ENGINES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY? NAVIGATING MERITOCRATIC EDUCATION DISCOURSE IN AN UNEQUAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary meritocratic education discourse in England positions schools as 'engines of social mobility', responsible for enabling students' educational 'success' regardless of their circumstances. Building on critiques that characterise meritocracy as a neoliberal cultural motif that legitimates inequalities, and drawing on the capabilities approach, this paper investigates the challenges of navigating meritocratic expectations in practice by drawing on qualitative and photovoice interviews conducted with teachers and students at a highly-rated London school serving a disadvantaged community. While many participants endorsed meritocratic narratives, all expressed doubts that the school could 'make up for' the significant structural disadvantages faced by many students. This led our participants to describe challenges associated with meritocratic discourse, including: the stresses of meeting these expectations; uncertainty about attributing responsibility for 'failure'; and questions about what could and should be done in practice to enable disadvantaged students to 'succeed'. We argue that meritocratic rhetoric imposes significant burdens on students, teachers and schools by holding

them responsible while obscuring the role that social inequalities play in shaping students' educational opportunities. Greater critical discussion in schools could help students and staff to challenge meritocratic education discourse and to negotiate its expectations.

Keywords: capabilities approach, education, inequality, meritocracy, opportunities, responsibility, social mobility.

INTRODUCTION

The view that schools should support ‘meritocratic social mobility’ is familiar internationally within educational discourse (Clycq, Ward Nouwen and Vandenbroucke, 2015; Hoskins and Barker, 2017; Smith and Skrbiš, 2017). It is particularly ubiquitous in English policy contexts where the Schools Minister recently stated that the education system ought to act as ‘an engine of social mobility’ (Gibb, 2016). Central to the notion of a meritocratic education system is the idea that schools should enable hardworking and talented students to succeed regardless of their circumstances. Concern for social mobility on the basis of merit has become *the* way successive governments, as well as many civil society organisations, have framed their social justice agendas over the last three decades. Education policy and practice continues to occupy a central place within contemporary discourse in England, with high quality schooling presented as a key means of realising the ‘national mission to level up opportunity across the country and build a fairer society’ (DfE, 2017a, p. 6).

As a narrative with broad political appeal, meritocratic social mobility is routinely taken-for-granted as a fundamental aim of education (Gibb, 2016; Gillies, 2005; Maslen, 2019). Its broad acceptance across much of public debate and its longstanding power and influence over popular opinion makes meritocratic discourse particularly important to investigate (Hinds 2018; May 2016; Mijs 2019). Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a burgeoning critique of meritocracy within the academic literature. For example, Jo Littler’s analysis (2013; 2017) characterises meritocratic discourse as a cultural motif that operates to justify the inequalities generated by neoliberal capitalism. Diane Reay (2013) argues that social mobility

should not be equated with social justice on the grounds that it fails to address educational inequalities or the wider social and economic injustices in which these are rooted. Likewise, Philip Brown argues that these entrenched inequalities have led to a form of ‘social congestion’ in the UK that renders meritocratic social mobility a fictitious narrative ‘that can no longer bear the weight of social and political expectations’ (2013, p. 679).

This paper builds on these critiques by discussing how meritocratic discourse plays out at the level of practice in a London school. In particular, we are interested in teachers’ and students’ experiences of the demands of navigating meritocratic expectations in the context of highly unequal social conditions. We collected interview and photographic data to examine participants’ views about the factors that affect students’ educational opportunities and their corresponding conceptions of responsibility for notions of educational ‘success and failure’. Analysis of our empirical data and the academic and policy literature is theoretically supported by the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2013), a perspective that provides “a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society” (Robeyns 2005, p. 94). The capabilities approach conceives of well-being, freedom and social justice in terms of the ‘capabilities’ (or genuine opportunities) people have to live lives that they value. Within this approach we focused particularly on the concept of ‘conversion factors’ which draws attention to the ways in which a person’s capabilities are shaped by their interactions with and interpretations of the material and social circumstances in which they are situated (Nambiar, 2013). The capabilities approach thus enabled us to examine how students’

educational opportunities are shaped by their relationships to a broad range of structural factors, and provided an alternative to - and a basis for critiquing - the highly individualistic perspective of meritocratic social mobility.

Our analysis demonstrates the problems posed by meritocratic educational discourse: the obfuscation of the effects of structural inequalities on educational opportunities; the burdens and practical uncertainties facing individual students, teachers and schools who are expected to overcome multiple forms of disadvantage; and the blame and marginalisation experienced by those that 'fail'. We preface this analysis with a brief account of how the discourse of 'meritocratic social mobility' has come to dominate the contemporary context of the English education system.

MERITOCRACY WITHIN EDUCATION POLICY

Contemporary usage of the term 'meritocracy' is derived from Michael Young (1958) who described it as a system of social, political and economic organisation that is based around the formulation: $\text{Effort} + \text{Talent} = \text{Merit}$. Young was critical of meritocracy, primarily because he thought it would produce starkly unequal social arrangements. He characterised a meritocratic society as highly stratified, divided between advantaged citizens who enjoyed the privileges afforded by their hard work and talents, and disadvantaged citizens who were personally responsible for their 'lowly' position by an apparent lack of ability and/or effort.

Over the course of the last fifty years the discourse surrounding meritocracy has shifted, with meritocratic arrangements that support high levels of social mobility becoming routinely presented as a positive attribute of a fair society (Allen, 2011). Key to this shift has been the rising popular influence of neoliberal political and cultural formations that have closely aligned meritocratic social mobility with social justice (Littler, 2017). William Davies describes neoliberalism in simple terms as an ideology that involves the ‘elevation of market-based principles and techniques of evaluation to the level of state endorsed norms’ (2017, p. xiv). Meritocracy plays a seductive role in embedding neoliberal norms of competitive individualism within educational contexts by promising to equalise opportunities so that hardworking and talented students will have a ‘level playing field’ on which to compete.

Advocates of neoliberal meritocracy have dominated English political culture for the last forty years and education policy has always been key to their plans (Quicke, 1988). It was as Education Secretary that Margaret Thatcher famously suggested that government policy should be oriented towards providing equality of opportunity that would:

let our children grow tall and some taller than others if they have the ability in them to do so. (1975)

Since then, meritocratic social mobility has been a common theme of Conservative, New Labour and the Coalition governments that followed. For example, Nick Clegg stated that ‘improving social mobility’ was the ‘principal goal of the Coalition Government’s social policy’ (HMG, 2011). More recently, Theresa May promised to

create a fairer society by making the UK the ‘world’s great meritocracy’ (2016). Central to this ambition is a plan to ‘improve social mobility through education’ (DfE, 2017a). For example, May’s Secretary of State for Education argued that it is possible to ‘break the cycle’ of low social mobility through schooling that raises aspirations and results, claiming that ‘the quality of teachers and teaching’ is the most important factor in this endeavour (Hinds, 2018).

As we have seen, critics of meritocracy argue that its prominence in discourse operates to legitimate the view that social inequalities are a ‘fair’ result of the ‘natural’ variations in talent and effort between individuals. It is therefore worth noting the central position of the ‘responsible individual’ within meritocratic education policy discourse which depends on individual students accepting personal responsibility to work hard, aspire and ultimately take up the opportunities that are provided to them. Such ‘responsibilisation’ of individuals as ‘entrepreneurial subjects’ has long been a pivotal plank of neoliberal policy making (Bröckling, 2015) and is fundamental to contemporary meritocratic social policy.

A key problem here is that this highly selective focus on the agency of ‘responsible individuals’ can obscure the effect of structural conditions on a person’s decisions, actions and performances (Trnka and Trundle, 2014). Where adverse social circumstances limit the scope of a person’s agency it is important to reflect on what they can reasonably be held responsible for. This is particularly relevant in the contemporary English context where multiple social disadvantages are widely experienced across the population, particularly amongst young people. For example, endemic poverty is a chronic problem for approximately a fifth of the UK population

with child poverty forecast to rise to affect as many as 40% of children between 2015-22 (IFS, 2017). A decade of economic austerity has brought severe cuts to public services and reductions in child, housing and educational benefits (O'Hara, 2014). As the Equality and Human Rights Commission report:

Child poverty has increased and the inequalities resulting from socio-economic disadvantage are seriously affecting many people's lives. Women are still not benefitting from equality in practice and there are increasingly large gaps between the experiences and outcomes of disabled people and some ethnic minorities and the population as a whole. The persistent disadvantages faced by certain groups raise significant concerns that some people are being forgotten or left behind. (2018, p. 7)

There is significant evidence that educational experiences, outcomes and career trajectories are subject to a social gradient with dis/advantage strongly linked to socio-economic status (DfE, 2018; Mountford Zimdars, 2016; Parsons, 2016). Indeed, the UK's own Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has presented a stark picture of 'an entrenched and unbroken correlation between social class and educational success' (2017, p. iii) leading to the damning verdict that 'whole sections of society feel they are not getting a fair chance to succeed, because they are not' (2017, p. viii).

An awareness of the significant disadvantages experienced by the worst off in the UK exposes the extent of the challenges facing the English education system that is expected to provide all students with equal opportunities. It also illustrates the cultural

and political value of meritocratic policy discourse. A narrative that positions schools as ‘engines of social mobility’ masks the problems associated with persistent social inequality by suggesting that students, teachers and schools can ‘make up the difference’. Meritocratic education policy discourse therefore performs a kind of disingenuous vanishing act: the limiting effects of structural disadvantages are simultaneously illuminated and obscured by a rhetoric that insists young people can transcend adverse social conditions by working hard to take up the opportunities offered by an equitable, high-quality education system.

The virtues of meritocratic social mobility have become ‘mythologised’ over the past forty years (Allen, 2011), with this discourse producing strong cultural effects. For example, Mijts has pointed to international evidence over 25 years that indicates that despite growing social inequality there has been a rise in the ‘popular belief that the income gap is meritocratically deserved’ (2019, p. 14). A number of empirical studies suggest that young people are internalising meritocratic ideals and taking up identities of aspiring and competitive neoliberal subjects who view themselves as responsible for their performances and achievements. In a large scale qualitative study, Mendick and colleagues identified a ‘hard work zeitgeist’ among young people who – contrary to popular stereotypes - had consistently high aspirations and valued hard work (2015, p. 175). Spohrer and colleagues (2018) describe how aspiration has been used as a technology of government in education to further the internalisation of a culture of neoliberal individualisation amongst young people. In the Australian context, a longitudinal study with secondary school students found evidence of a widespread belief that “hard work would lead to academic success” (Smith and Skrbiš 2017, p. 441). As these studies illustrate, discourses of aspirational meritocracy create

an educational culture that encourages individual students to believe they will need to work hard and take personal responsibility if they are to be ‘successful’. Yet there are few studies that investigate how students and teachers experience and navigate the challenges produced by such discourses in the school context, particular in contexts of severe inequality. This is what we seek to do in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical analysis in this paper is based on qualitative research with six students and four teachers in a London school sixth form for students aged 16-18 that serves a relatively socio-economically disadvantaged community. ‘Hope Street School’, a large state-funded community secondary school in inner London (800 students, ages 11-18) with an ethnically diverse student body with relatively low socio-economic status evidenced by roughly 25% of its students eligible for free school meals compared to the national average of 12.9% (DfE, 2017b). The school was selected because of its strongly meritocratic ethos - as evidenced by its mission statement to ‘transform the life chance of all our students’ (painted in large, bold letters on the wall above the school’s reception) – and because it is perceived as highly ‘successful’ (judged ‘Outstanding’ by the UK Schools Inspectorate, Ofsted). Hope Street sixth form engages in many practices aimed at ‘levelling the playing field’ which include: supplementary private tutoring for sixth form students; a student mentoring programme with ‘professionals’ from the local community and across the capital; a modest student bursary programme; a work experience programme; and extensive pastoral support. Thus, we do not claim that Hope Street is representative of other

schools; rather, it is in the relatively privileged position of being able to provide diverse educational opportunities that many other schools lack. By selecting such a setting, factors related to perceived school inadequacy are minimised; if inequalities in mobility persist here at an ‘outstanding’, well-resourced and well-connected school, where should responsibility be placed?

Staff and students were approached through a gatekeeper, a senior teacher, who was asked to identify a range of teachers and students who might be interested in sharing their views. By design, all of the participating students were from households classed as socio-economically disadvantaged (signified by their entitlement to free school meals) and varied in gender, ethnicity and attainment at GCSE level. The teachers we spoke to varied in terms of their level of seniority, professional experience, subject specialism and gender. All participants were informed about the study, both verbally and through an information sheet, and all signed a consent form agreeing to take part with the option of withdrawing from the study at a later date. The study received institutional ethical approval. All participants and institutions have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Name	Position	Gender	GCSE attainment	Ethnicity
Chris	A level Student	Male	Moderately attaining	Black
Eni	A level Student	Female	Low attaining	Black
Naomi	A level Student	Female	Low attaining	Black
Nathan	A level Student	Male	High attaining	White
Stella	A level Student	Female	Moderately attaining	White
Stephan	A level Student	Male	High attaining	White

Mr Adams	Head of sixth form	Male	N/A	White
Ms Lauren	PE teacher	Female	N/A	White
Mr Roberts	Sociology teacher	Male	N/A	White
Mr Thompson	Physics teacher	Male	N/A	White

[Author 1] conducted a set of semi-structured individual interviews of approximately 30 minutes. Questions focused on identifying the factors that shape students' educational opportunities (what helps/hinders success at/beyond school?) and on issues of responsibility for educational 'success' (if a student doesn't do well at this school is it their fault?). After the first set of interviews, student participants were invited to use a disposable camera to take photographs of things - both at school and beyond - that they thought positively or negatively shaped their educational opportunities. Drawing on elements of 'photovoice' methodology (Sutton-Brown, 2014), this enabled a more detailed discussion of students' lives outside of school. Four students agreed to participate in the photovoice activity which included a follow up interview of approximately 30 minutes to discuss their images and their reasons for taking them.

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and imported into NVivo for qualitative data analysis. The data were initially thematically coded in line with the personal, social and material 'conversion factors' – factors which affect whether an individual is able to convert the resources they have access to into genuine opportunities and achievements - derived from the capabilities approach (Nambiar 2013) in order to understand the complex combinations of causal mechanisms that

participants described as shaping students' educational opportunities. An online software package, Kumu.io, was used to visually map the relationships between the personal, social and material conversion factors identified in the data. Subsequently, narrative analysis was overlayed onto the initial thematic coding in order to investigate participants' responses to normative questions associated with issues of responsibility and their attitudes towards meritocratic expectations. Photographic data was discussed in follow up interviews with students and analysed according to principles of photovoice analysis (Sutton-Brown, 2014) before being integrated into the emerging analysis. Both authors participated in multiple examinations and discussions of the interview and photographic data before agreeing a shared interpretation of participants' experiences of studying and working within an educational context highly influenced by meritocratic norms and expectations. The relatively small sample of students and teachers at a single school prevents us from generalising from our findings. However, the evocative accounts given by our participants along with the theoretical framing provided by the capabilities approach deliver some important insights into the challenges facing those who must negotiate the demands of meritocratic discourses in practice.

FINDINGS

We organise our findings around two key themes. Firstly, we present students' and teachers' explanations of the myriad factors that shape educational opportunities, highlighting that there is a great deal more involved in turning access to a good school place into educational opportunities and achievements than simply students' talents

and efforts. Secondly, we report the difficulties participants experienced when reflecting on how responsibility for educational ‘success’ and ‘failure’ should be judged.

Factors Shaping Students’ Educational Opportunities

There are significant overlaps between the various factors affecting students’ educational opportunities. Our aim is therefore to discuss participants’ awareness of the complexity of the interrelated causal mechanisms that shape educational opportunities, including but not limited to the meritocratic norms and expectations surrounding ‘hard work and talent’.

As might be expected given the pervasiveness of meritocratic rhetoric, individual students’ ‘natural talents’ and attitudes towards hard work were frequently seen by our participants as key for maximising opportunities. Nathan, a highly attaining student who hoped to go to an elite university, summed this view up neatly:

I’m sort of quite naturally good at understanding concepts, especially in Maths. But on the flip side I do believe that if you put enough work into your studies you will achieve... The question always comes down to whether or not you’re willing to sacrifice all that time for work.

Many participants expressed the importance of students’ making an effort, and developing positive and responsible attitudes at school and at home. Stephan, another highly attaining student, saw the school as ‘offering me the education, it’s up to me to

take the education’. These attitudes from the two highest attaining students in the sample reflect the school’s attempts to instil a sense of positive agency amongst students. Teachers described holding motivational assemblies that encouraged students to take ‘responsibility for their own work’ (Mr Roberts). Students also recognized the impact of positive classroom habits (e.g. regarding attendance, concentration, listening and note taking), studying at home (Stephan described himself as a ‘revision freak’) and finding ways to balance their studies with other responsibilities as having a positive impact on their learning opportunities.

Using the theoretical lens of the capabilities approach, the talents, attitudes and dispositions of students can be understood as key *personal* conversion factors shaping their educational opportunities. But participants also suggested that educational opportunities were shaped by *social* and *material* conversion factors too, which refer to the various relational structures in which students are situated. For example, good relationships between staff and students were described as key to supporting positive attitudes and behaviours at the school, with teachers’ efforts, expertise, care and empathy seen as particularly important by students. Teachers identified pastoral staff as vital in building such positive relationships, with one teacher describing them as the ‘glue’ that held the school together. Students also reported their peers as important in creating an atmosphere of mutual encouragement and motivation. The ethnic, cultural and religious diversity at the school was valued by students, who suggested it broke down stereotypes and provided a sense that anyone could succeed regardless of their background.

While most discussions of relationships at Hope Street were positive, there were a few instances of contrasting examples; these may be expected in any school, and further highlight the importance of teacher engagement and care. One student, Chris, recounted an instance in which a teacher had formed a low opinion of his abilities which he felt had led them to ‘give up on’ him. Another, Stella, who had particularly challenging home circumstances, suggested that some teachers struggled to understand and recognise the issues students faced:

My English teacher... she’s never had to experience anything like I’ve experienced. So, she doesn’t really understand what I have to do. And sometimes it’s like she doesn’t try to understand.

Looking at the wider relationships affecting students’ educational opportunities revealed further evidence of the differences between students’ and teachers’ backgrounds, identities and perspectives. Several teachers were concerned that students were exposed to negative norms and expectations at home and in their communities, characterising this in terms of ‘deficits’ within socio-economically disadvantaged families and communities. For example, Mr Adams the head of sixth form suggested the school ‘needs to be a substitute family in many respects’. This view was echoed by the physical education teacher, Ms Lauren, who describes her work as a ‘battle against’ parents and communities (including the attraction of local gangs) who lack educational aspirations and do not value education. Such explanations – which again reproduce dominant discourses of family and community deficit – were not echoed by the students we spoke to, who described their home and

family relationships primarily as sources of motivation, inspiration and practical support.

The broader social and material circumstances of students' home lives were also identified as a key factor affecting educational opportunities, particularly by teachers. All the teachers recognised that many households within the local community faced conditions of acute multiple deprivation, and explained this as a potential cause of poor motivation and/or low aspirations in students. Poverty, overcrowded housing, anxiety, mental health issues, historic educational disadvantage and language issues were cited as prevalent issues that might limit students' educational opportunities.

Students' comments about life outside school focused more on the practical challenges they faced than any perceived deficit in their family or community environment. In particular, interview and photo data from students with younger siblings pointed to variations in their access to study resources at home. While Stephan photographed his desk in his quiet, private bedroom, along with text books, laptop and extensive online revision resources (image 1), and Nathan described his bedroom as an 'optimal set up for learning', other (less highly attaining) students had limited access to quiet study spaces and learning resources at home. For example, Eni's photograph of her home study space (image 2) shows a room with four bunk-beds to accommodate her three younger siblings, and she reported having to visit local libraries to study effectively. Stella's photograph of her study space away from school shows an alley close to the school gates where she said she studied because she had nowhere quiet and safe at home or elsewhere that she could concentrate (image 3).



Image 1.



Image 2.



Image 3.

These images illustrate the stark variations in the students' access to resources and environments conducive to studying away from the school and vividly demonstrate the practical impact that poverty, insecurity, scarce resources and overcrowded housing can have in limiting students' educational opportunities.

Stella also explained how her caring responsibilities for her mother and brother were compounded by acute issues of poverty, ill health and domestic violence, and how this led to stress and insecurity which severely affected her education. She described her part-time factory job as necessary if she was 'to be able to afford all of things that people just naturally get'. Stella's job and her caring and domestic responsibilities

limited her study time and created severe anxieties that made focusing on education extremely difficult:

I'm an adult, I'm a student and I'm a carer... it's really hard to balance all of those three roles at the same time... I'm spending my time being here, going to school, going shopping and doing everything that my parents should do. So yeah. That kind of stops me from wanting to read my books and stuff like that. It's kind of like, one of the things that kind of makes me a bit sad. Because I never get to be like the younger kids.

Acute awareness of the impact that severe material deprivation may have on their students' educational opportunities led to the teachers we spoke to feeling obliged to do their best to 'level up the playing field' as Mr Adams put it. Mr Thompson, a physics teacher, saw the school's high expectations as central to helping these students transcend conditions of structural disadvantage:

having high expectations is key to exceeding, you know, the parameters set upon you by the circumstances of, you know, your upbringing or your immediate family, etc, etc. I think that's really important... we do have as high expectations for these children as sort of humanly possible. To sort of bring them out of the mire that they can come to us in.

This comment typified the school's determined response to redress the disadvantages faced by their students and to instil ambitions and aspirations in their students. Most of the teachers reported a strong sense that hard work and support can provide

opportunities for disadvantaged students to succeed, and in this respect they appeared to endorse the meritocratic view that effort would pay off, regardless of the effects of multiple forms of structural disadvantage.

Locating Responsibility for Educational 'Success' and 'Failure'

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their awareness of the numerous factors that shape educational opportunities, students and teachers found it difficult to answer questions about attributions of responsibility for the perceived 'success' or 'failure' of young people in education. A majority of participants used meritocratic language, but this language was also frequently questioned, and all of our participants, at least to some extent, questioned or resisted the norms and expectations that accompanied it. For example, when asked to reflect on responsibilities for creating and taking up educational opportunities a number of students provided explanations that incorporated both personal and relational factors:

students have got to take responsibility for their education, but it's also up to the teachers to give them a fair chance and find ways to encourage them.

(Chris)

When asked whether students who do less well at the school ought to be seen as responsible for their poor performance, Naomi said that 'it depends on how the student worked' and if they 'didn't take on board the opportunities [at the school] then yes it could be their fault' but qualified this by immediately adding that

‘sometimes it may not be their fault because it could be to do with their home background as well.’

Other participants’ acknowledgment of constraints were superseded by meritocratic beliefs in the importance of effort and personal responsibility. Despite acknowledging that issues like mental health problems could limit opportunities, Nathan saw students’ poor grades as ‘indicative that they haven’t put as much work in’. He went on to explain that

all other things being equal I do believe that if you’re not doing well there is something that you can address to do better.

His use of the phrase ‘all other things being equal’ is striking given the extensive structural inequalities that characterise the educational experiences and opportunities of many of his fellow students. This illustrate how awareness of the role of multiple forms of disadvantage can be displaced by a meritocratic rhetoric – particularly for students like Nathan and Stephan who appear able to meet expectations by working hard to make the most of their talents.

More broadly, however, the students and teachers we spoke to were reluctant to make simple attributions of ‘blame’ or to over-emphasise individual responsibility. The majority of participants attempted to provide nuanced accounts which acknowledged the complex relationship between agents and their structural circumstances. However, many of our participants acknowledged the ethical uncertainties this created and typically struggled to articulate where responsibility should lie. For example, when

asked if students who don't do well at the school should be held responsible for their poor performance Mr Adams replied in a qualified manner:

it's not necessarily the student's individual fault... there may be individual cases where it's the school's fault but for the vast majority of cases the school is doing everything they can to, to make sure the students have the best possible chances of success. There are lots and lots of other factors, social factors, family factors, that, that may affect students' chances of succeeding which are not the [fault of] individual students... I think it's unfair to say it's the student's fault, but... you know, obviously defending the school I don't think it's the school's fault... there are other considerations.

Mr Adams here is at pains not to blame the school or the students, yet he struggles to provide an alternative position. The difficulties involved in articulating a balanced view were explained by Mr Roberts, the sociology teacher:

whilst the students on the one hand understand the nature of inequality and the fact that it has a massive role in structuring their lives and reducing their chances, there's also... this sort of contradictory view that you get to where you are based on your own efforts and that if you don't do very well that's your own fault. So, it's a sort of combination of the two.

This comment points to a significant tension that participants struggled to negotiate. On the one hand they were aware that structural factors often limited students' agency in ways that made attributing responsibility difficult, but on the other hand many of

the participants appeared to have internalised meritocratic discourses that stress the importance of aspiration, effort and personal responsibility.

As a sociologist, Mr Roberts was able to account for the role that structural factors such as poverty and inequalities linked to ‘race’ and gender played in creating instances of social disadvantage for certain students:

I think the best viewpoint to take is to say to students, particularly Black, working class students and, you know, women who are also outside of education and sort of disadvantaged, things like, you know, you’re gonna find it harder - because of racism, because of exploitation, because of patriarchy – to get ahead than comparable people. But the balance to draw is to sort of explain that you can still make it but you gotta acknowledge that it’s gonna be harder. I don’t think the school really does make that balance enough, although I think the best teachers or the ones that have the best view on that do.

This comment highlights the dilemmas teachers experienced in finding practical ways of balancing encouragement for students to work hard and take responsibility for their learning with appropriate recognition of and sensitivity to the adverse impacts that structural disadvantages will have on some students. As we have seen in Stella’s account, differences in identity and status between students and teachers and the complexities of their relationships may make communication and interpretation of this nuanced message challenging. Mr Roberts described how such concerns might dissuade teachers from engaging with the effects of the structural disadvantages that

shape some students experiences, and how meritocracy provides a more palatable alternative narrative:

There's almost like a view like a sort of colour blind view, it's like, you know, if you start talking about that then you're just acknowledging that you're not gonna make it so actually what you gotta do is just ignore that. And I do think that is ultimately the view that pervades. The view that as long as you've been given a chance, it's up to you to take responsibility to make it.

Mr Roberts went on to explain why he thought the internalisation of the meritocratic narrative amongst his colleagues was so problematic:

I think lots of people really do genuinely believe that the education system is able to redress the balance and to kind of level off that playing field... but I don't think they truly understand the relationship between the unequal structure of our society and how that reproduces all the things we see here about under-performance of certain groups.

This comment illustrates the power of meritocratic discourse to obscure inequalities, with teachers encouraged to simultaneously acknowledge and disregard the impacts of a complex combination of diverse inter-related structural factors that limit students' educational opportunities, and to focus instead on promoting a sense of aspiration and personal responsibility in their students. Faced with the ethical and practical uncertainties surrounding issues of inequality and responsibility meritocratic discourses have an obvious appeal.

DISCUSSION: THE BURDENS OF MERITOCRACY

To adopt the conceptual language of the capabilities approach, our data illustrate how a myriad of ‘conversion factors’ affect students’ freedoms and capabilities. Our analysis reveals educational opportunities to be shaped by a complex combination of overlapping causal mechanisms, including: personal (e.g. talents, dispositions, habits, efforts; mental and physical ill health); material (e.g. poverty, domestic insecurity, conditions within local neighbourhoods); and social (including familial roles and commitments, cultures of discrimination and disrespect, relationships at school, at home and within the local community). As we have seen, meritocratic policy discourse tends to emphasise the role that personal factors can play in affecting students’ success by suggesting that the adverse effects of social and material disadvantage can be transcended through hardwork and access to good schooling. Awareness of the full breadth and complexity of conversion factors allows us to recognise the overly reductive nature of this rhetoric and the burdens that it places on students, teachers and schools at the level of practice. For example, Chris, a Black, working class student, felt pressure in competing for educational ‘success’ alongside his more affluent peers:

So, I’m thinking ‘OK, I’m probably on the edge, up against thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people even, just for that place at uni’. Cos everybody wants to aim high... [but] my grades... will be an issue. And they said if it’s below... [a threshold score] they will automatically reject my

application. So, I was thinking to myself, ‘OK... I’ve got a problem that I really need to pull my socks up in order to maybe get above these grades’. And it is doable. But at the same time, I have to be realistic. And that’s another pressure that piles on young people, is that in order to get into the university that they want they have to work twice as hard or 10 times as hard as others just to get what they want.

The stresses of enacting the meritocratic values of ‘talent and hard work’ are clearly expressed here. While Mr Roberts’ advice that ‘you can succeed but you may need to work harder than others to make up for the effects of disadvantage’ may be realistic, it can also reproduce and amplify the pressure in ways that may lead teachers to feel complicit in the imposition of the burdens faced by students. This may lead to students who are doing ‘well enough’ sensing they are falling behind; high attaining students may work increasingly hard – perhaps becoming ‘revision freaks’, as Stephan described himself - exhausting themselves in the process; and students with lower attainment, who often have additional barriers, may feel they cannot compete on the grounds of either talent or hard work.

Alongside the sense of conflict that teachers may feel in contributing to the ‘responsibilisation’ of students, positioning schools as ‘engines of social mobility’ also places a burden of expectation on teachers to perform heroic deeds, and to share students’ responsibilities for failure. Students are often aware of this; Chris reported that some of his teachers ‘work too hard’ and suggested the school should ‘relieve the pressure off teachers’ by reducing their workload. Teachers themselves report high levels of commitment. Mr Thompson describes ‘fighting for that equality’ as the

motivation that led him to join the school. Ms Lauren explains that the staff's commitment to providing students with opportunities 'that they might not get in another school' often leads them to put in a significant amount of time and effort, which can in turn reinforce meritocratic evaluations of personal responsibility:

We put in a lot of effort. I would stay here until 6, 7 every night if a kid asked me to, to work. But if it gets to the point where you teach them how to revise and they're not going home and they're not revising, you know, that [failure] is their fault, really.

Together with the anxiety and stress created by meritocratic norms of competition and personal responsibility, this rhetoric can lead to the alienation and exclusion of those who, for whatever reason, cannot or will not meet its expectations. Stella described meritocracy as a "stupid idea" because it is "deterministic" and marginalises non-academic and working-class students whom she describes as routinely maligned by middle-class policy makers. Such concerns illustrate how meritocratic rhetoric itself can reproduce forms of exclusion in ways that limit the educational opportunities of disadvantaged students. This risks perpetuating a narrative of 'victim-blaming' by implicitly holding students (and schools) responsible for 'failure' on the apparent basis that they have been granted ample opportunities to 'succeed'. Teachers working in this context therefore face a number of ethical questions: how can they support students' aspirations while acknowledging the structural barriers they face? How do they encourage students' efforts without intensifying stress? How do they teach the importance of responsibility without reproducing cultures of individualism and victim-blaming? Faced with such uncertainties the practical question of what students

and teachers can and should actually do to negotiate the demands of meritocratic expectations is vexing. The realities of the contemporary English education system mean that students have little choice but to 'work hard' and compete as best they can. The need for a 'level playing field' is therefore obvious; but expecting individual students, teachers and schools to bear the burdens of achieving this in the long-term absence of effective policies for alleviating structural inequalities both cynically disregards the facts and cruelly leaves students and teachers with little option but to bear the burdens of meritocratic expectations and so to perpetuate cycles of stress, marginalisation and disadvantage. Mr Roberts' feelings of unfairness, complicity and frustration lead him to articulate a desire to replace neoliberal meritocratic approaches to education with a socially oriented alternative:

At the moment we have an education system which more or less attempts to justify an incredibly unequal society. And it really annoys me when even I find myself explaining to students, you know, "you're in competition with other people", and, you know, "if you don't do well you've only got yourself to blame". Cos ultimately it's not actually true. So as much as I try to teach my students about these things and highlight inequalities that exist and the reasons for them, I myself as part of the education system still go some way towards justifying and reproducing the same inequalities that happen year after year. So I guess what I'm saying is: don't worry about the education system so much, worry about society.

This comment neatly illustrates the sense of disingenuity and oppression generated by meritocratic discourse while pointing to the potential of an alternative educational

narrative that focuses more broadly on the impacts of social inequalities possibilities of structural change.

The students and teachers we spoke to struggled to navigate meritocratic discourses because of the insidious contradiction they are faced with: they are encouraged to believe that students are ‘free’ to achieve if they work hard and to accept responsibility for their performance, yet many of them were aware that in practice effort and aspiration may be insufficient for transcending the effects of significant inequalities. It is the students and teachers at schools like Hope Street who must bear the burdens of making sense of this incongruous meritocratic narrative whilst shouldering the responsibility of making up for entrenched material and social disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

This paper illustrates the challenges facing students and staff as they attempt to make sense of meritocratic expectations in the context of pernicious social inequality. Despite the efforts of students, families, and Hope Street’s staff, our data draw attention to the significant influence of structural disadvantages on students’ educational opportunities: poverty, cramped housing, caring responsibilities, mental health issues, patriarchy, racism, and narrow notions of ‘success’. If social mobility really is to become ‘a core purpose’ of the education system in England (Hinds 2018) deep and broad structural change is needed to reduce the endemic social inequalities facing the most disadvantaged students.

Our analysis aligns with the literature that highlights the contradictions and tensions within this policy narrative, and questions the view that social mobility is a means towards social justice. We have illustrated how meritocratic education policy is experienced by students and teachers at Hope Street School in the form of significant burdens that generate ethical uncertainties and practical dilemmas. Our data shows how the seductive power of this discourse leads to the internalisation of meritocratic expectations that discounts structural disadvantages and legitimates social inequalities. However, this discourse also creates major problems. While the majority of our participants resisted simplistic ‘victim blaming’ discourses, the persuasiveness of meritocratic logic generated tensions by encouraging them to accept narratives of personal responsibility despite awareness of the significance of structural disadvantages. The majority of the students and teachers we spoke to felt that they had little choice but to bear the burdens of meritocratic expectations and to try to work hard and do the best they can.

Our analysis suggests there is a need for a more sophisticated, socially oriented alternative narrative to that of meritocratic discourse. This points to the value of further theoretical and empirical research in this area. It also suggests that schools, students and teachers are not powerless in relation to inequalities, either on a personal or political level. Their voices can join those challenging the assumptions of meritocratic social mobility and calling for systemic political, cultural and economic change. They may also contribute to effecting change in practice, for example by finding time and space – whether in classrooms, common rooms or in the context of teacher training and development – for open and honest discussion about how to deal

with the burdens of meritocratic expectations. This might include listening to students about their experiences and the challenges they face, finding appropriate means of encouragement that emphasise collective support rather than individual competition, and valuing existing community assets and support systems. Clearly, such approaches would require students and educators to have opportunities to think and speak critically about these issues, which might be difficult to imagine in the highly pressured environment of contemporary education in England. Yet students, staff, policy makers, and the public would benefit from a more nuanced way of discussing how the opportunities of young people are formed, how they can best be supported and what role the education system can be expected to play in this. This matters because far from enabling a more just society, the prevailing meritocratic education discourse obscures the effects of structural disadvantages, reproducing social inequalities and perpetuating a cruel and cynical fiction.

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